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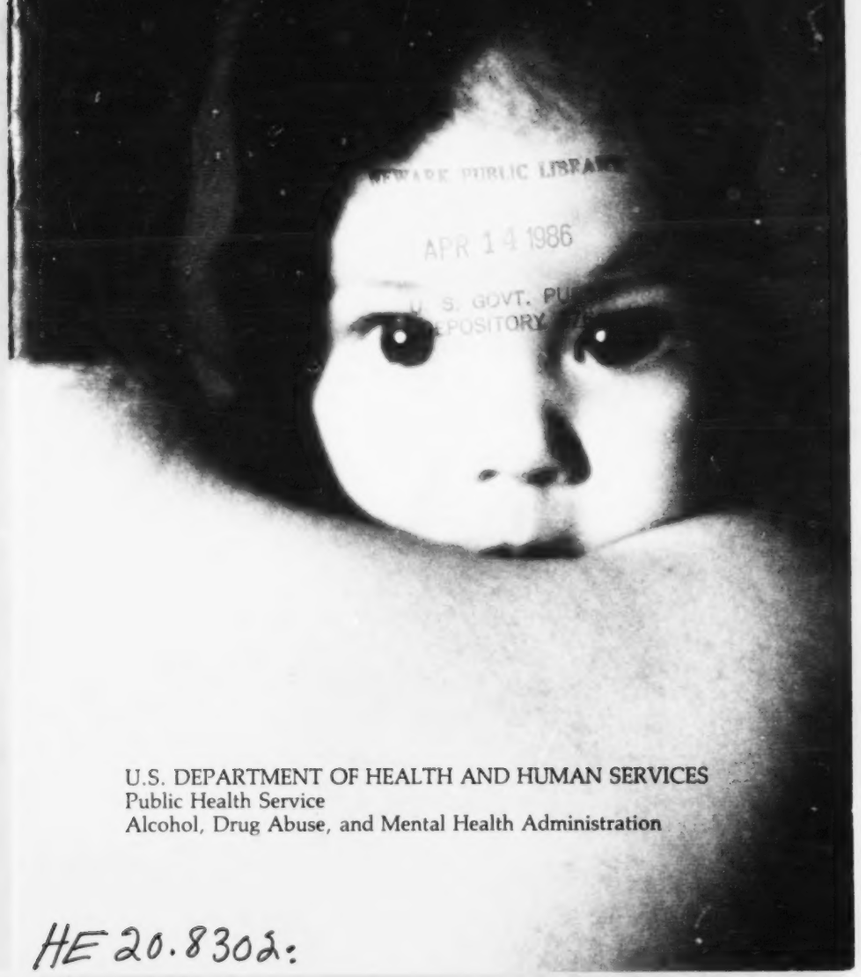
National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism

My Baby... Strong and Healthy



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The safest choice is not to drink at all during pregnancy or if you are planning pregnancy. —
U.S. Surgeon General

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My Baby... Strong and Healthy

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
Public Health Service
Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health Administration
National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism
5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville MD 20857

My Baby...Strong and Healthy

For most women, pregnancy is a time of intense, often mixed, feelings. The good feelings can be very good: anticipation, pride, excitement, a sense of fulfillment. But because having a baby is such an important event in one's life, it is also natural to experience some doubts and fears along with the "highs." Even in the most wanted of pregnancies, many women wonder, Can I handle the responsibility of another person for the next 18 years? Can I afford this baby? Will it be a difficult birth? And perhaps most worrisome of all, will I have a healthy, normal child?

You Can Make a Difference

Most women worry about the health of their child at some point during their pregnancy. But what many women don't know is that there are a number of things they can do during pregnancy to increase the chances of delivering a healthy baby. Regular prenatal check-ups and a nutritious diet are important. But an expectant mother also should be extremely careful about the kinds and amounts of drugs she takes. In addition to many illegal drugs, several legal drugs are known to cause birth defects when taken during pregnancy. Over the past 12 years, clinical reports and studies have confirmed that alcohol exposure poses a threat to the health of the unborn child.

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Alcohol: A Powerful Drug

Alcohol is so taken for granted in our society that most of us don't even think of it as a drug. Yet whenever we have wine with a meal, a gin and tonic at a party, or a beer with the late movie, we are consuming a central nervous system depressant that affects nearly every organ in our bodies. Alcohol abuse over a period of time can contribute to a number of serious disorders, including muscle and heart disease, malnutrition, digestive problems, and liver cirrhosis. It should not be surprising that this powerful, addictive drug, when used during pregnancy, also can affect the delicate and developing system of the unborn baby.

During the last decade, researchers have conducted a number of studies of infants born to women who drank heavily during pregnancy. The results are disturbing. A significant number of the infants studied were born with a definite pattern of physical, mental, and behavioral abnormalities that researchers named the "fetal alcohol syndrome." Babies with this syndrome were shorter and lighter in weight than normal, and they didn't "catch up," even after special postnatal care was provided. They also had abnormally small heads, several facial irregularities, joint and limb abnormalities, heart defects, and poor coordination. Most also were mentally retarded and showed a number of behavioral problems, including hyperactivity, extreme nervousness, and poor attention span. And for every infant born with fetal alcohol syndrome, there are several more born with only some of the features of the syndrome. When only some of the characteristics are present, they are called "alcohol-related birth defects."

How Alcohol Affects the Fetus

It may be hard to believe that alcohol can cause such devastating effects in the unborn baby. An understanding of how alcohol interacts with the fetus may help. When a pregnant woman takes a drink, the alcohol readily crosses the placenta to the fetus. It then travels through the baby's bloodstream in the same concentration as in the mother. So if the expectant mother drinks at a party, her unborn baby drinks as well. But, the tiny, developing system of the fetus is not equipped to handle alcohol, so the unborn baby must depend on its adult mother to burn up the alcohol. Unfortunately, the fetus can't say "no."

How Much Drinking Is Harmful?

Until it is very clear which women—if any—can drink alcohol safely during pregnancy, its use—even on infrequent occasions—should be avoided. Research has shown that alcohol affects all the organ systems of the developing baby. While high levels of consumption are necessary to produce *all* the features of fetal alcohol syndrome, alcohol-related birth defects have appeared in babies whose mothers drank smaller amounts. In fact, the more a mother drinks, the greater are the chances of health problems for her newborn baby. However, if an expectant mother avoids alcohol altogether, there is *no* possibility of having a child with fetal alcohol syndrome or alcohol-related birth defects.

Risk Factors

What risks are there for the woman who drinks only occasionally, but perhaps heavily each time? We still don't know the answer to this question. But we do know that the fetus gets a potent dose of alcohol each time the mother takes a drink. Since any exposure to alcohol is known to put the fetus at risk, it stands to reason that even occasional heavy drinking should be avoided.

It is well known that many people who abuse alcohol also tend to smoke a lot of cigarettes, use other drugs, pay little attention to nutrition, and generally suffer a great deal of emotional stress. All these factors are related to reproductive risk. How do we know, then, that alcohol is the real culprit in the development of birth abnormalities? Could any of these other behaviors, alone or in combination, be partially or even totally responsible for what we call the fetal alcohol syndrome or for other problems associated with alcohol use in pregnancy?

Other factors may well play a role in the development of the syndrome, and indeed they are known to be contributors to such problems as low birth weight. However, alcohol itself appears to be the only agent common to all fetal alcohol syndrome cases. Moreover, animal studies have shown that the presence of other factors—like caffeine, other drugs, tobacco, or malnutrition—are not necessary for alcohol to cause damage to the fetus. In these studies, pregnant animals that consumed alcohol gave birth to offspring with defects similar to those seen in the human fetal alcohol syndrome.

Thoughts on Drinking During Pregnancy

At this point, you may feel uncertain about how to approach drinking during pregnancy. There is much we have yet to learn about this problem, including the risks of small amounts of alcohol; whether the fetus is most susceptible to alcohol at a particular time during pregnancy; and the degree to which risk is compounded by other factors, such as nicotine use and poor nutrition. Until all the facts are in, however, it makes sense to exercise extreme caution. In fact, the U.S. Surgeon General says that *the safest choice is not to drink at all during pregnancy or if you are planning or anticipating pregnancy.* In addition, women who breastfeed should continue abstaining from alcohol until their babies are weaned.

Know the Risks

We really don't know at what level alcohol begins to harm the fetus. At the lowest doses, the risks from alcohol are probably very small, but as consumption increases, so do the risks. The more alcohol an expectant mother drinks, the greater are the risks she takes with the health of her unborn baby.

Studies also show that the sooner an expectant mother stops drinking, the better are the chances that her baby will be born strong and healthy. And remember, there is *no* possibility of having a child with fetal alcohol syndrome or alcohol-related birth defects if an expectant mother avoids alcohol during her pregnancy. Until all the facts are in, this seems the safest and wisest course to follow to ensure the best possible outcome of pregnancy.

If you're accustomed to coping with tension or depression by having a few drinks, don't fill the void by using other mood-altering drugs, such as tranquilizers or antidepressants. Some of these drugs also may be harmful to the baby when taken during pregnancy. In fact, since most drugs cross the placental barrier to your baby, it is a good idea to take only those that are absolutely necessary during your pregnancy. *Check with your doctor before taking any drugs,* including simple over-the-counter medicines such as aspirin and sleeping preparations.

Alternatives to Alcohol

Pregnancy changes your life in some important ways, and you're bound to feel some stress during this period. For various reasons, some women experience more anxiety and depression than usual during pregnancy. In any case, there may be times when a few friendly drinks will seem like a good antidote to whatever is troubling you. *At those times, stop and try to think of other ways you might handle your feelings.*

First, make sure you are clear about just what is bothering you. Is there any specific action you could take to improve the situation? Or would simply talking about your feelings with someone close to you help? Sometimes a long walk, some relaxing music, or some kind of creative outlet can do a lot to relieve stress. Have you ever tried meditation? Pounding a pillow to vent frustration? Writing out your feelings? You may be surprised at how effective some of these alternatives to alcohol can be.

Getting Help

If you think you may have an alcohol problem, discuss it with your doctor. You can find help through your local affiliate of the National Council on Alcoholism, mental health agency, Alcoholics Anonymous chapter, Women for Sobriety group, or another self-help group. Most of these referral sources can be found in your telephone directory. If you find yourself seriously depressed or anxious and can't seem to shake it off, consider getting some help. Your local women's center may run a counseling program as well as a number of special support groups for women. Women's centers, area mental health agencies, and your own doctor are possible sources for counseling referrals.

You Can Make a Difference

There are a lot of "do's" and "don'ts" associated with pregnancy, and sometimes you may feel a bit overwhelmed by them. It often seems there is so much to suspect, reject, and avoid! But underlying all the advice and recommendations you receive is the important message that *what you do makes a difference.*

For further information write:

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol Information
P.O. Box 2345
Rockville, Maryland 20852

or call:

(301) 468-2600

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National Clearinghouse for
Alcohol Information
P.O. Box 2345
Rockville MD 20852
(301) 468-2600

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